

The Meaning of “Magdalene”: A Review of Literary Evidence

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While it is common today to refer to Jesus’s disciple Μαρία[μ] ἡ Μαγδαληνή as Mary “of Magdala,” with Magdala identified as a Galilean city named Tarichaea, what do our earliest Christian sources actually indicate about the meaning of this woman’s name? Examination of the Gospel of Luke, Origen, Eusebius, Macarius Magnes, and Jerome, as well as evidence in hagiography, pilgrimage, and diverse literature, reveals multiple ways that the epithet ἡ Μαγδαληνή can be understood. While Mary sometimes was believed to come from a place called “Magdala” or “Magdalene,” the assumption was that it was a small and obscure village, its location unspecified or unknown. Given the widespread understanding that Mary Magdalene was the sister of Martha, it could even be equated with Bethany. However, Jerome thought that the epithet was a reward for Mary’s faith and actions, not something indicative of provenance: Mary “of the Tower.” No early Christian author identifies a city (Tarichaea) called “Magdala” by the Sea of Galilee, even when they knew the area well. A pilgrim site on ancient ruins, established as “Magdala” by the mid-sixth century, was visited by Christians at least into the fourteenth century, and thus the name is remembered today. In view of the earlier evidence of Origen and Jerome, however, the term ἡ Μαγδαληνή may be based on an underlying Aramaic word meaning “the magnified one” or “tower-ess,” and is therefore best left untranslated.

In biblical scholarship, and some translations, it has become commonplace to refer to Jesus’s disciple Μαρία[μ] ἡ Μαγδαληνή as “Mary of Magdala.”¹ The

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¹For Μαγδαληνή, see Matt 27:56; 27:61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John

assumption is that Mary's epithet indicates the place of her origin. Recently, Richard Bauckham has gone so far as to suggest that reading Μαγδαληνή as "of Magdala" is the only legitimate way to interpret this term.² While there were numerous places beginning with the term "Migdal/Magdal," "the Tower of [*something*]," Bauckham argues that the city of Tarichaea (Cicero, *Fam.* 12.11; Josephus, *A.J.* 14.20; 20.159; *B.J.* 1.180; 2.252; *Life* 32; Pliny, *Nat.* 5:27.71), located beside the Sea of Galilee, should be equated with a place dubbed "Magdala," found in later rabbinic literature as Migdal Tsebayya ("the Tower of Dyers") and Migdal Nuniyya ("the Tower of Fish").³ He concludes that this city "must have been much the most important and best known of the various places called Migdal or Magdala in first-century Palestine."⁴ Similarly, Jane Schaberg writes, "The names Migdal Nunya and Taricheae reflect the city's importance as the main center of the prosperous fishing, fish-processing and exporting industries in eastern Galilee."⁵ Mary is assumed to have gained her name from this location; thus, her epithet must have been clearly understood by all her contemporaries.

However, the equation of the Galilean city of Tarichaea with places named "Migdal-" ("Tower of") in rabbinic literature can be seriously questioned. There is no evidence that anyone ever called Tarichaea by the name of "Magdala."⁶ In the present discussion, we will not go over this ground again, but rather focus on the literary evidence about Mary's moniker, ἡ Μαγδαληνή, in itself. How clear is it that ἡ Μαγδαληνή was understood to refer to Mary as coming from a city called Magdala, located beside the Sea of Galilee? We will present the evidence from ancient authors and consider how the word Μαγδαληνή was read. Although there

19:25; 20:1, 18. The translation "Mary of Magdala" is standard in the NJB. In scholarship, see, e.g., Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader* (New York: Paulist, 1995); Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Rethinking the 'Gnostic Mary': Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition," *JECS* 9 (2001): 555–95; Andrea Taschil-Erber, "Apostle and Sinner: Medieval Reception of Mary of Magdala," in *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio, *Bible and Women* 6.2 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 301–26; Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003). This latter title appears despite the ancient Coptic colophon appearing only as πᾶν ἀγγέλιον κατὰ μαρίαν, "The Gospel according to Mary." See also Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 21–31; and Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 47–64.

²Richard Bauckham, *Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Period* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 361, and also 349–50, 358–61.

³Note that "Migdal" is found here because in Mishnaic Hebrew it is standard practice to use the Hebrew construct form "Migdal" even with Aramaic nouns, but "Magdala" reflects Aramaic pronunciation.

⁴Bauckham, *Magdala of Galilee*, 360.

⁵Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 55.

⁶Joan E. Taylor, "Missing Magdala and the Name of Mary 'Magdalene,'" *PEQ* 146 (2014): 205–23, here 217.

have been various ways of understanding her name, no author prior to the sixth century identifies her as coming from a place beside the Sea of Galilee. Several ancient authors actually understood Mary’s nickname to be rooted in her character rather than her provenance. Given that the title ἡ Μαγδαληνή can be understood in manifold ways, we suggest that translations presuming Magdala as Mary’s place of origin should be avoided in future biblical scholarship.

I. THE PRESENTATION OF ἡ Μαγδαληνή IN LUKE-ACTS

The earliest evidence significant for this discussion is biblical. In the Gospel of Luke the participle *καλουμένη* is uniquely used to designate Mary’s epithet: *Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή*, “Mary, called Magdalene” (Luke 8:2). As Joan Taylor has pointed out, “When other people are ‘called’ by such epithets in Luke-Acts, it is because they are named in a special way by Jesus or others.”⁷ Many illustrative examples can be listed.

- αὐτῇ τῇ καλουμένη στεῖρα, “she who is called barren” (Luke 1:36)
- Σίμωνα τὸν καλούμενον Ζηλωτὴν, “Simon called Zelotes” (Luke 6:15; cf. Acts 1:12)
- ἀδελφὴ καλουμένη Μαριάμ, “a sister called Mary” (Luke 10:39)
- ἀνὴρ ὀνόματι καλούμενος Ζακχαῖος, “a man called by the name Zacchaeus” (Luke 19:2)
- Ἰούδαν τὸν καλούμενον Ἰσκαριώτην, “Judas called Iscariotes” (Luke 22:3; cf. 6:16)
- Ἰωσήφ τὸν καλούμενον Βαρσαββᾶν, “Joseph called Barsabbas” (Acts 1:23)
- νεανίου καλουμένου Σαύλου, “a young man called Saul” (Acts 7:58)
- Σίμων ὁ ἐπικαλούμενος Πέτρος, “Simon called Peter” (Acts 10:18; 11:13)
- Ἰωάννου τοῦ ἐπικαλουμένου Μάρκου, “John called Mark” (Acts 12:12; 15:37)
- Συμεὼν ὁ καλούμενος Νίγερ, “Simeon called the black” (Acts 13:1)
- Ἰούδαν τὸν καλούμενον Βαρσαββᾶν, “Judas called Barsabbas” (Acts 15:22)

Of all of these epithets, only Ἰούδαν τὸν καλούμενον Ἰσκαριώτην has been suggested as a reference to a place (Kerioth), but this geographical explanation is generally rejected.⁸ Luke-Acts demonstrates a tendency to use participles of *καλέω* when referencing nicknames or even simple names.

⁷Taylor, “Missing Magdala,” 206. See also Thierry Murcia, *Marie appelée la Magdaléenne: Entre traditions et histoire, Ier–VIIIe siècle*, Hérétiques méditerranéens (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2017), 288–89; Margaret Starbird, *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* (Rochester, VT: Bear, 2005), 52–59; Mary Ann Beavis, “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,” *CBQ* 74 (2012): 281–97, here 287; Elizabeth Schrader, “Was Martha of Bethany added to the Fourth Gospel in the Second Century?,” *HTR* 110 (2017): 360–92, here 388–89.

⁸For a brief survey of debates concerning the meaning of “Iscariot,” see Anthony Cane,

By contrast, when designating people according to their place of origin, this author prefers other formulas.

- Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος, “Jesus the Nazarene” (Luke 18:37; cf. 24:19)
- Σίμωνά τινα Κυρηναῖον, “Simon, a certain Cyrenian” (Luke 23:26)
- Ἰωσήφ ... ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας πόλεως τῶν Ἰουδαίων, “Joseph ... from the Jewish town of Arimathea” (Luke 23:50–51)⁹
- Νικόλαον προσήλυτον Ἀντιοχείας, “Nicholas, a convert from Antioch” (Acts 6:5)
- Λούκιος ὁ Κυρηναῖος, “Lucius the Cyrene” (Acts 13:1)
- Λυδία ... πόλεως Θυατείρων, “Lydia ... from the city of Thyatira” (Acts 16:14)
- Ἀκύλαν, Ποντικὸν τῷ γένει, “Aquila, a native of Pontus” (Acts 18:2)
- Ἀπολλῶς ὀνόματι, Ἀλεξανδρεὺς τῷ γένει, “named Apollos, a native of Alexandria” (Acts 18:24)

In none of these cases is anyone said to be “called” by a nickname.

Perhaps most striking is the contrast between the introductions of Simeon and Lucius in Acts 13, where the distinction between someone who is “called” by a nickname and someone identified by place of origin is clear.

- Συμεὼν ὁ καλούμενος Νίγερ, καὶ Λούκιος ὁ Κυρηναῖος, “Simeon called the black, and Lucius the Cyrenian” (Acts 13:1)

Here the author uses *καλούμενος* when providing Simeon’s nickname, “the black,” but gives Lucius the designation “the Cyrenian” (without the *καλέω* participle) when referencing his place of origin.

Notably, when introducing Mary Magdalene, the author of Luke has avoided the phrasing *Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή* that we find in other gospels—and thus the changed formulation suggests that the author understood the word *Μαγδαληνή* to be *unlike* location-related terms (cf. Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος, Λούκιος ὁ Κυρηναῖος). Matthew, Mark, and John’s standard formulation is changed to *Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή*, “Maria called the Magdalene” (Luke 8:2) and *ἡ Μαγδαληνή Μαρία*, “the Magdalene Maria” (Luke 24:10). This indicates that, for Luke, the name Magdalene was not understood in a locational sense.

The Greek ending *-ηνή* added to a place can indicate a place of origin, as in an inscription identifying a woman as a *Βισαρηνή* (Bisarene).¹⁰ In a document from the Judean Desert there is a reference to Babatha as *Μαωζηνή* (of Maoza) and Mariam as *Ἡνγαδηνή* (of Engadda; P.Yad. 26.2–3). However, the definite article,

“Contested Meanings of the Name ‘Judas Iscariot,’” *ExpTim* 112.2 (2000): 44–45. Taylor has argued that Ἰσκαριώθ should be understood as a nickname, given Origen’s observation that the Aramaic word *Iskarioutha* means “choked up.” See Joan E. Taylor, “The Name ‘Iskarioth’ (Iscariot),” *JBL* 129 (2010): 367–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27821024>.

⁹Many thanks to Mark Goodacre for pointing out this example.

¹⁰Bauckham, *Magdala of Galilee*, 350 n. 21.

combined with the Lukan usage of being “called” such, indicates a nickname in Luke-Acts. While Mary could have gained a nickname from a location,¹¹ to be *called* Mary “the Magdal-ess” is oddly unspecified, given the many places called Tower of *Something* (Migdal Gad, Migdal El, Migdal Eder, Migdal Senna, and so on).

II. EXTRABIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Origen of Alexandria

Our earliest extrabiblical evidence is found in the writings of Origen (third century). In his *Series Commentary on Matthew*,¹² the names of the women who come to the cross to witness Jesus’s death (Matt 27:55–56) are characteristically interpreted allegorically. According to a sixth-century Latin translation of this work, the word “Magdalene” indicates Mary’s significance.

Multae ergo erant spectantes tunc Iesum, praecipuae autem nominatae sunt et quasi attentius *spectantes* et amplius *ministrantes* et melius sequentes: Maria Magdalena magis interpretationi nominis patriae suae conveniens, quae Magdala appellatur (interpretatur autem MAGNIFICATIO locus ille). et erat haec *Maria Magdalena* de magnificatione propter nihil aliud, nisi quia secuta fuerat *Iesum* et ministraverat *ei* et spectaverat mysterium passionis ipsius. erat autem inter praecipuas. (*Comm. ser. Matt.* 141)¹³

Many then were looking at Jesus; indeed they are especially named, as if they are *looking* more carefully, and were the greater *ministers* and better followers. Maria Magdalena—most appropriate for the interpretation of the name of her provenance, which is called Magdala (translated: that place is “Magnifying”). And here she was, *Maria Magdalena* of Magnification, for the sake of nothing else, except that she had followed Jesus and ministered *to him*, and she had looked at the mystery of his passion. Indeed, she was among the prominent ones.¹⁴

While Origen considers the epithet to indicate Mary’s provenance, the key element for him is its meaning of “Magnification.” In his *Dictionary of the Bible*, William Smith comments, “Origen, lastly, looking to the more common meaning of מַגְדָּלָה

¹¹ An ostrakon from Masada may have a definite article with a region and also a woman’s name, “Salome the Galil[ean],” *Shalom ha-Galil[it]* (Mas 404), indicating her nickname, though this is in Hebrew and the reading is not certain.

¹² This now survives only in Latin along with scattered Greek catena fragments. For comments on the manuscript situation, see <https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2015/06/09/some-notes-on-origens-commentary-on-matthew/>.

¹³ See Erich Klostermann, ed., *Matthäuserklärung*, 3 vols., Origenes Werke 10–12, GCS 40 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1935–1955), 2:293–95. Formatting follows Klostermann’s edition.

¹⁴ Taylor’s translation. An alternative translation is found in Ronald E. Heine, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols., OECT (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2:760–61.

(*gādal*, ‘to be great’), sees in her name a prophecy of spiritual greatness as having ministered to the Lord, and been the first witness of his resurrection.”¹⁵ Importantly, here Origen was not thinking of a place called *ἡ Τῆλῃ*, a Tower of *Something*; in reading “magnifying” he understood *Magdala* as an Aramaic *aphel* feminine participle from the verbal root form *לגל*, “make great, magnify,” with a prefix *mem* (*מלגל*). It seems that since *-ηνή* can be added to the name of a place to indicate provenance for women, Origen plausibly suggests that Mary gained her moniker because a place called “Magdala” was her original provenance (*patria* means “fatherland” or “native place”). This name, however, was really indicative of her significance.

There is also a surviving Greek catena fragment text of the same segment of Origen’s work that is much shorter. This text reads:

πολλῶν δὲ οὐσῶν καὶ ἄλλων γυναικῶν κατ’ ἐξοχὴν αὐταὶ ὠνομάσθησαν αἱ μᾶλλον
θεωροῦσαι καὶ διακονοῦσαι καὶ κρεῖττον ἀκολουθοῦσαι· ἡ ἀπὸ τοῦ μεγαλυσμοῦ
Μαρία (Μάγδαλα γὰρ ΜΕΓΑΛΥΣΜΟΣ ἐρμηνεύεται)¹⁶

Since there were many and other women who were named according to pre-eminence [as] the better watchers and servers and greater followers: Maria from the Magnification (for Magdala means MAGNIFICATION).¹⁷

It should be noted that, in this catena version of Origen’s text, there is no equivalent of the Latin phrases *nominis patriae suae* or *locus ille*; however, such catena fragments often function as a sort of shorthand and are not always a reliable representation of Origen’s Greek text.¹⁸ While a locative meaning may well be intended with the phrase ἀπὸ τοῦ μεγαλυσμοῦ, Origen does occasionally use ἀπὸ with the genitive

¹⁵William Smith, “Mary Magdalene,” in *Dr. William Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible, Comprising Its Antiquities, Biography, Geography, and Natural History*, vol. 3: *Marriage to Regem*, rev. and ed. H. B. Hackett and Ezra Abbott (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1871), 1812b–16a, here 1812b.

¹⁶Klostermann, *Matthäuserklärung*, 2:293–94.

¹⁷Taylor’s translation. Ronald Heine renders the Greek phrase as “While there were many other women there, these are named as the principal ones who saw in a greater way and served, and followed more excellently; Mary from *the place* greatly praised (for Magdala is interpreted to mean ‘a place greatly praised’)” (emphasis added). Heine expands on the phrase ἀπὸ τοῦ μεγαλυσμοῦ (*Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of Matthew*, 2:761). But one must wonder if Heine’s modern understanding of “Mary of Magdala” has influenced his translation of the Greek; in §144, the Latin reads *Post haec caritas duarum Mariarum, Magdalenae et matris Iacobi et Ioseph* (Heine, 763). Heine translates this phrase as “the two Marys, the one from Magdala and the mother of Jacob and Joseph.” The words *quae ex Magdala* are nowhere present in the Latin, and thus Heine’s translation is somewhat misleading.

¹⁸See Ronald E. Heine, “Can the Catena Fragments of Origen’s Commentary on John Be Trusted?,” *VC* 40 (1986): 118–34. Many thanks to Stephen Goranson for his recommendation of this article, as well as his assistance in identifying this passage’s location in the *Series Commentary*.

to describe a character trait associated with a noun.¹⁹ Since the word *τόπος* is nowhere present in the catena fragment, a geographical inference is less certain from the surviving Greek.

So where did Mary come from, according to Origen? In his *Commentary on Ezekiel*, now preserved only in fragments in medieval catenae, Origen interpreted the *Μαγδωλά* (Migdol) of Ezek 29:10 and 30:6 as “magnification/exaltation.”²⁰ In Num 33:7 (and see Exod 14:2), Origen interpreted another Magdolos (Migdol, Hebrew: *מִגְדֹּל*; Greek: *Μαγδώλου*),²¹ one of the stopping places of the exodus from Egypt, as “Magnificence”: *Magdalum enim magnificentia dicitur* (Hom. Num. 27.9.3).²² In this context, it clearly made sense for Origen to suggest a place so named.

Yet Origen did not need to know the precise locations of these places to use them in his exegesis; once a place was read reliably in Scripture, he interpreted it allegorically. Furthermore, Origen is important here as much for what he does not say as for what he does. During the writing of the *Series Commentary on Matthew* (ca. 240 CE), Origen lived in Caesarea and traveled around Palestine, including to the Sea of Galilee.²³ He was careful to note place-names if there was any question about their correct written form, because his allegorical exegesis depended on such accuracy. He was thus critical of mistakes in manuscripts that would have Gergesa as Gerasa (a city across the Jordan) or Gadara. Therefore, he describes Gergesa as “an ancient town on the lake now called ‘Tiberias,’ beside which is a steep place next to the lake from which, it is pointed out, the swine were cast down” (*Comm. Joh.* 6.24);²⁴ meanwhile Gadara had famous hot springs, no nearby lake, and no overhanging banks. With “Magdala,” however, the name itself is all that interests Origen. If Origen knew Mary came from a city actually called Migdal Nuniyya (“the Tower of Fish”) or Migdal Tsebaya (“the Tower of Dyers”), also called Tarichaea (“preservation”), he would have worked with such meanings and clarified the

¹⁹See, e.g., Origen’s description of Ophites in *Cels.* 6.28. See also Smyth §1694c.

²⁰See Origen, *Fr. Ezech.* 30.6; for text and translation, see Roger Pearse, ed., *Origen of Alexandria: Exegetical Works on Ezekiel; The Fourteen Homilies and the Greek Fragments of the Homilies, Commentaries and Scholia; Text and Translation*, trans. Mischa Hooker, Ancient Texts in Translation 2 (Ipswich: Chieftain, 2014), 684–85 n. 811; see also 716.

²¹See Wilhelm Adolf Baehrens, ed., *Die Homilien zu Numeri, Josua und Judices*, vol. 2 of *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung*, Origines Werke 7, GCS 30 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1921), 269, line 22; translation in C. A. Hall, ed., *Origen, Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 176–77.

²²See discussion in Timothy Mitchell’s blog *The Textual Mechanic*, <https://thetextualmechanic.blogspot.com/2018/08/a-text-without-martha-implications-of.html>. We are grateful to Richard Fellows for this reference.

²³In *Comm. ser. Matt.* 77 Origen notes his previously written *Commentary on John*; the majority of the *Commentary on John* was written in Caesarea.

²⁴Joan E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 105–6.

circumstances. If Magdala really was a well-known city, it is also puzzling that Origen makes no reference to it as such. Despite his suggestion that a place was meant, Origen's etymological exploration here may well point us in a different direction, to the meaning of Μαγδαληνή as a hellenized form of an Aramaic nickname with the root ܡܕܐ.²⁵ We will revisit this below.

Eusebius of Caesarea

Early in the fourth century Eusebius also suggested that Mary hailed from a place, which he called "Magdalene" (not "Magdala"). In order to explain a discrepancy between Matthew and John, Eusebius proposed that there were *two* Marys from "Magdalene."²⁶ Eusebius wrote:

It is better, though, not to allege there is an error in the passages, but to say that there were actually two Magdalenes [Μαγδαληνάς].... Of these, it is not strange to say that it is appropriate that two Marys came from the same Magdalene [ἀπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς Μαγδαληνῆς], nor then to have difficulty in saying that one of them was the Magdalene [Μαγδαληνήν] who came to the tomb late on the sabbath, in Matthew, and then again that the other, also a Magdalene [Μαγδαληνήν], in John, came there early in the morning. (*Ad Marinum* 2.9)²⁷

Although picked up by Ambrose of Milan, the idea that there were two Mary Magdalenes did not gain much traction, probably due to later objections from Jerome (see below).²⁸

Notably, Eusebius did know of a "Magdala," as we find in his entry in his *Onomasticon* 130.8:

Μαγδαλά. φυλῆς Ἰούδα²⁹ ("Magdala. Of the tribe of Judah") (*Onom.* 130.9)

²⁵ See Ally Kateusz, "Two Women Leaders: Mary and the Other Mary Magdalene," in *Rediscovering the Marys: Maria, Mariamne, Miriam*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis and Ally Kateusz, Scriptural Traces 22 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), 79–96, here 94.

²⁶ See Kara J. Lyons-Pardue, "Two Mary Magdalenes: Eusebius of Caesarea and the Questionable Reliability of the Gospels' Female Witnesses," in Beavis and Kateusz, *Rediscovering the Marys*, 69–78.

²⁷ In David J. D. Miller's translation in Roger Pearse's edition (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Gospel Problems and Solutions / Quaestiones ad Stephanum et Marinum* [CPG 3470], Ancient Texts in Translation 1 [Ipswich: Chieftain, 2010] 113 [Greek on 112]), the place-name has been incorrectly rendered as "Magdala" and throughout the translation Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή is rendered as "Mary of Magdala." See also *Ad Marinum* 3.4.

²⁸ See Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 10.153: "According to John the one Mary Magdalene knows nothing of it, according to Matthew the other Mary Magdalene does. It is impossible that one of the two can first not have known and afterwards have known. If there are more Marys, then there are also more Magdalenes, for Mary is the name of the person and Magdalene of the place where they come from." This translation in Esther de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources behind the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 102; CSEL 32:513–14.

²⁹ See Joan E. Taylor, ed., *The Onomasticon of Eusebius of Caesarea: Palestine in the Fourth*

However, Eusebius here cites Josh 15:37, which is part of a list of the “cities of the tribe of Judah” (cf. Josh 15:21). This is not a place by the Sea of Galilee, but Migdal-Gad (Kh. el-Mejdeleh). Nevertheless, Eusebius does not associate this “Magdala” with either of his two Marys from “Magdalene.” The site of Num 33:7 and Exod 14:2 in the desert (underlined by Origen in *Hom. Num.* 27.9.3) is listed in the *Onomasticon* as “Magdōlos” (Μάγδωλος, *Onom.* 124.5–126.2), where “the Jews who followed Jeremiah dwelt in Egypt” (Migdol, Jer 44:1). Eusebius also knew several other places called “Migdal-Something” (e.g., Magdalsenna, *Onom.* 154.16; Num. 34:4).

Like Origen, Eusebius makes no mention of “Magdalene” being a town called Tarichaea situated by the Sea of Galilee; this is despite the fact that Eusebius lived in Caesarea (like Origen later in his life) and had a keen interest in biblical places, composing his *Onomasticon* partly to determine where they lay.³⁰ Rather, in terms of Galilean places, he notes the town of Magedan (Matt 15:39 and Mark 8:10),³¹ and states, καὶ ἔστι νῦν ἡ Μαγεδαν ἢ περὶ τὴν Γέρασαν (“It is now Magedane³² in the vicinity of Gerasa [= Gergasa],” *Onom.* 134.18–20).³³ By contrast, despite his keen interest in places, Eusebius does not identify where the supposed village of “Magdalene” may have been.³⁴

Macarius Magnes

Macarius Magnes wrote a treatise known as the *Apocriticus* or *Monogenēs*, during the reign of the emperor Valens (364–378 CE),³⁵ which survives only in a single codex and is not widely known. In this work, Macarius sought to refute objections to Christianity, much as Origen had done with Celsus. In summarizing the points of view of the opposition, he may rely on an epitome of the lost work of Porphyry, *Against the Christians* (234–ca. 305) or another similar work by

Century A.D., trans. Greville S. P. Freeman-Grenville, index by Rupert L. Chapman III (Jerusalem: Carta, 2003), 72, 143.

³⁰ See Taylor, “Missing Magdala,” 208.

³¹ For “Magedan” in manuscripts of Mark 8:10, see below.

³² Note that Eusebius spells the names of contemporary towns differently from what is in the Bible, in line with their common pronunciation in his time.

³³ For discussion, see Taylor, “Missing Magdala,” 218–19. As Origen noted (see above), manuscripts could have “Gerasa” for “Gergasa.” Eusebius indicates that he read “Gerasenes” (*Onom.* 64.1–4) but also found “Gergasa” (Matt 5:1), which he defines as “a village ... beside Lake Tiberias” (*Onom.* 74.13).

³⁴ Perhaps, in proposing a village named Magdalene, rather than Origen’s Magdala, this reflected Aramaic מגדל עני, *Magdal-Enei*, meaning “Tower of Response/Obedience.” This would correlate with Origen’s definition of “Bethany” as בית עני, “House of Obedience” (*Comm. Matt.* 16.26; *Comm. Joh.* 6.24).

³⁵ Richard Goulet, ed., *Le Monogénès*, 2 vols., Textes et traditions 7 (Paris: Vrin, 2003), 1:41–51.

Sossianus Hierocles (ca. 303).³⁶ In representing such opposition to Christianity from the aforesaid philosophers, Macarius wrote (*Apocriticus* 2.14):

ἀλλ' ἐμφανίζει τῇ Μαгдаλινῇ³⁷ Μαρία γυναικὶ χυδαία καὶ ἀπὸ κωμυδρίου
λυπρωτάτου τινὸς ὀρμωμένη, καὶ ὑπὸ ἑπτὰ δαιμόνων κατασχεθείσῃ ποτὲ, μετ'
ἐκείνης δὲ καὶ ἄλλῃ Μαρία ἀφανεστάτῃ καὶ αὐτῇ γυναίῳ κωμητικῇ, καὶ ἄλλοις
ὀλίγοις οὐ σφόδρα ἐπισήμοις³⁸

But rather he appeared to the Magdalene Mary,³⁹ a common woman, one who came from some very miserable little village and who had once been possessed by seven demons [Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9], and with her another very obscure Mary [Matt 28:1–10], also herself a village woman, and to a few others who are utterly unknown.

This shows that opponents of Christianity could use a known interpretation that Mary came from “some very miserable little village” (κωμυδρίου λυπρωτάτου τινός), as opposed to a well-known city, as one of the reasons to consider her testimony to the resurrection as worthless. Macarius, in her defense, writes that Christ did not approach “honorable men of the band of Romans” (ἀξιόλογοις τῆς Ῥωμαίων σπείρας) but rather appeared “to women who were not able to prevent or persuade anyone [by oratory]” (γυναιξὶ μὴ δυναμέναις ἀρῆξαι μηδὲ πείσαι τινα).⁴⁰ Macarius does not at all counter the opposition by stating that actually Mary came from a well-known city named Tarichaea. He accepts the criticism as true and makes the best of it. There is no indication where the little village lay, but, interestingly, the rare adjective κωμυδρίος is used specifically of Bethany in a poem by Macarius’s contemporary Gregory Nazianzus (PG 38:188).⁴¹ Macarius clearly did not think Mary’s name derived from a well-known city called “Magdala,” and, like Gregory, he might well have been thinking of Bethany.

Jerome

Thus far, we do see early Christian writers proposing that Mary’s name could be understood as connected with provenance, but this is not linked to a well-known

³⁶Robert M. Berchman, *Porphyry against the Christians*, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 4–5. For the Greek text, see C. Blondel, ed., *Macarii Magnetis quae supersunt, ex inedito codice edidit* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1876); and English translation by T. W. Crafer, *The Apocriticus of Macarius Magnes*, TCLG (London: SPCK, 1919), 43.

³⁷The codex in fact reads Μαгдаλινῇ; see Blondel, *Macarii Magnetis*, 23 n. 6.

³⁸See Goulet, *Le Monogénès*, 2:36.

³⁹Macarius uses the nickname form of Luke 24:10.

⁴⁰Blondel, *Macarii Magnetis*, 35.

⁴¹Probably from κώμη + ὕδριον, diminutive of ὕδρια, meaning a small water pot or cistern (LSJ, s.v. “ὕδρια”). The term reflects the sense of a “one-horse town.”

city in Galilee. In both Eusebius and Macarius Magnes, Mary’s provenance is understood as a village, even a very small, miserable one. According to Jerome, however, the word *Magdalene* should be understood not in terms of a place at all but rather in the light of its meaning alone. In a letter written to Principia in 412 CE, Jerome wrote:

Mariamque proprie Magdalenen, quae ob sedulitatem et ardorem fidei, turritae nomen accepit, et prima ante Apostolos, Christum videre meruit resurgentem. (*Ep.* 127)

And Mary, properly “the Magdalene”—who, because of diligence and ardent faith, received the name “of the tower/tower-ess”—deserved to see the risen Christ first before the apostles.⁴² (our translation)

For Jerome, an expert on Hebrew and Aramaic and entrusted by Pope Damasus with the task of translating Scripture for the Latin Vulgate, ἡ Μαγδαληνή was honorific, not related to provenance.⁴³ For Jerome, ἡ Μαγδαληνή meant “of the tower,” from the Hebrew word מגדל (“tower”).⁴⁴ It is a name that was particularly given to Mary. This interpretation is similar to Origen’s in that Mary’s moniker is seen in light of something special about her.

Jerome had lived in Palestine for over twenty years at the time he wrote to Principia, and he knew the land well, including Galilee. He endorsed Eusebius’s note of “Magedane” as a known settlement beyond Gerasa (= Gergesa) in his Latin version of the *Onomasticon* (Magedena [*De Locis Sanctis* 135.22–24]; Magedan appears in the Vulgate translation of Matt 15:39). Thus, for Jerome there is no “Magdala.”

In *Ep.* 120.4 (to Hedybia) Jerome shows familiarity with Eusebius’s theory that Mary was named in accordance with a village (*vicus*) and that there were two Marys from the same place, to solve the discrepancies between Matthew and John.

Licet quidam duas Marias Magdalenas de eodem vico Magdalo fuisse contentant, et alteram esse, quae in Matthaeo eum viderit resurgentem, alteram, quae in Joanne eum quaerebat absentem.

Some contend, however, that there were two Mary Magdalenes from the same village “Magdal,” one who according to Matthew sees him [Christ] risen, another who according to John looked for him forlorn.

⁴² See F. A. Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, LCL 262 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 450–51.

⁴³ Bauckham dismisses the position of Jerome: “It should be clear that there is no philological basis for the claim that Mary’s epithet ἡ Μαγδαληνή does not refer to her place of origin but is a nickname meaning ‘the tower’ (i.e. ‘protective tower’ or ‘tower of strength’), comparable with Simon Peter’s nickname ‘rock’” (*Magdala of Galilee*, 359–60).

⁴⁴ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1993), 413. Haskins’s translation is on 58.

Jerome himself, however, is not taken with this theory. In this letter he also asserts that there are only four gospel women named Mary: Mary, mother of Jesus; Mary, wife of Cleopas and aunt of Jesus; Mary, mother of James and Joses; and Mary Magdalene.⁴⁵ This comment implicitly suggests that Jerome understood Mary Magdalene to be the sister of Lazarus and Martha (see below).⁴⁶ He also knows of Origen's definition of Magdol (Num 33:5) as meaning "magnitude" or "greatness," though he suggests it means "magnitudo vel turris" ("magnitude or tower," *Ep.* 128). Jerome knew several places called "Tower of *Something*," and he associated Mary with none of them. Tellingly, he does not mention a Magdala by the Sea of Galilee in letters about his pilgrimage with Paula and Eustochium (*Ep.* 46 and 108). For Jerome, it is more likely that Mary Magdalene, as the sister of Martha, was honored elsewhere, at an underground chapel in Bethany identified as the *hospitium* ("guest-room") of Martha and Mary (*Ep.* 108.12).⁴⁷ In addition, in the Vulgate he translated *κώμης* in John 11:1 as *castellum*, suggesting that Bethany itself was a castle or tower, while endorsing also Origen's definition of the name as meaning "house of obedience" (*Tract. Marc.* 11.1; CCSL 78:484–87). In Luke 10:38 likewise, the Vulgate states, "intravit in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam Martha nomine excepit illum in domum suam" ("he entered into a certain *castellum*: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house"). Since *castellum* has multiple meanings, including "citadel," this would create an implication that the home of Martha and Mary was itself a *Migdal/Magdal*.

III. THE IDENTITY OF MARY MAGDALENE

Jerome's concept of the identity of Mary Magdalene is important to note. The above-mentioned writers worked in an environment in which she was often seen as Mary the sister of Martha (as found in John 11:1–12:11, Luke 10:38–42), and strongly associated with Bethany (John 11:1).⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Jerome, *Ep.* 120.4 (*To Hedybia*): Quatuor autem fuisse Marias, in Evangeliiis legimus, unam matrem Domini Salvatoris, alteram materteram ejus, quae appellata est Maria Cleophe, tertiam Mariam matrem Jacobi et Jose, quartam Mariam Magdalenam. In *Against Helvidius* 16 (written over twenty years earlier), Jerome had entertained the possibility that Mary of Clopas might be the same woman as Mary the mother of James and Joses.

⁴⁶ Although, as Susan Haskins has noted, he may have been "unable to decide" (*Mary Magdalen*, 95).

⁴⁷ Joan E. Taylor, "The Cave at Bethany," *RB* 94 (1987): 120–23; Taylor, "The Bethany Cave: A Jewish-Christian Cult Site?," *RB* 97 (1990): 453–65; Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places*, 180–92.

⁴⁸ E.g., Pistis Sophia (see 1.36–38, 1.72–73), second Greek version of the Gospel of Nicodemus, and Severus of Antioch's 45th *Cathedral Homily*, among other works. For a survey and a table of the evidence, see Beavis, "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," 290–92. The clearest early delineation of Martha's sister Mary and Mary Magdalene is found in the second-century Epistula

This equation is very easy to make. In John's Gospel a woman named Mary anoints Jesus's feet with pure nard and, when challenged by Judas, Jesus states, "Leave her alone; let her keep it for the day of my burial" (John 12:7). As for this expected burial, it is Mary "the Magdalene" who then comes to the tomb (20:1). It seems to follow, in the Johannine narrative, that Mary Magdalene is the Mary in Bethany, who then completes the task of coming to the tomb with saved perfume. Later readers of Luke's Gospel who connected Mary Magdalene with the anointing at Bethany additionally identified Mary Magdalene with Luke's "sinful" anointer. Yet this exegetical move inserts meanings into the Lukan narrative that are not there; despite the proximity of the story of the sinful woman (Luke 7:36–50) and the introduction of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2), Luke's anointing woman is clearly anonymous, and there is no hint that she was a demoniac.

Certainly there was never a consensus on any of these readings. Although Origen may have been aware that Mary of Bethany was sometimes identified with Mary Magdalene, he refrains from ever explicitly stating a correspondence. At the same time, Origen could elide Mary of Bethany with the sinner of Luke 7. He wrote, "the woman who had done bad deeds and repented was able to anoint Jesus with fragrance because of her true repentance from bad deeds, and she made the perfume of ointment in the whole house, perceived by all who were there" (*Comm. Jo.* 1.11.67; trans. Taylor).⁴⁹

This widespread disagreement about Mary of Bethany's identity may in fact be the fallout of an early editorial change to the Fourth Gospel. In a recent text-critical study based on Papyrus 66 and over a hundred other crucial manuscripts of John, Elizabeth Schrader has argued that Martha was imported from Luke 10:38–42 and was not present in the initial circulating text of John's Gospel.⁵⁰ If so,

... with only Mary present I believe readers would be far more likely to connect John 11 to John 20:11–17, where one woman named Mary also cries and speaks with Jesus at another tomb. Several specific words are emphasized in both chapters [e.g. *μαριαμ*, *κλαιουσα*, *μνημειον*, *λιθος*, *που τεθεικατε αυτον*, *σουδαριον*, *αδελφος μου*].... Mary of Bethany is also associated with Jesus's burial (12:7), as is Mary Magdalene (20:1). These repeated themes demonstrate an obvious parallelism between the chapters, a parallelism that would certainly be amplified in Martha's absence.⁵¹

Apostolorum 9 (this text extant in one fifth-century Coptic manuscript): "There went to that place [three] women: Mary, she who belonged to Martha, and Mary [Mag]dalene." See Julian V. Hills, *Tradition and Composition in the Epistula Apostolorum*, HTS 57 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 79.

⁴⁹ Cf. Luke 7:37–38 and John 12:3.

⁵⁰ Schrader, "Was Martha of Bethany Added?," 360–92.

⁵¹ Ibid., 387–88. Beavis similarly argues, "If the Johannine reader/audience perceived 'Magdalene' as a title as opposed to a gentilic differentiating her from the sister of Martha and Lazarus 'of Bethany,' it is conceivable that, irrespective of authorial intent, the reader/audience would have

The parallels between John 11–12 and John 20 may then be the origin of Mary Magdalene's early identification with Mary of Bethany. Even when Martha was included in the Lazarus story, Mary Magdalene's association with the Bethany family seems to have stuck.

Whether original Johannine intention or not, Mary of Bethany's identification as Mary Magdalene was made by many of the earliest Christian commentators.⁵² In Hippolytus's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 25.2–3, written in the third century, Martha appears alongside Mary in the Johannine resurrection scene.⁵³ In the Manichaean Psalm-Book, Mary Magdalene is similarly portrayed as the sister of Martha.⁵⁴ In the late fourth century, Ambrose of Milan mentions Martha as being healed of an issue of blood and her sister Mary as having had demons expelled from her, again indicating her identification with Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2).⁵⁵ Although this association was not unanimous, it was common for early commentators to assume that Mary Magdalene was a member of the Bethany family.

The later conflation with Luke 7's sinful anointer created the "repentant Mary" character of the West, formalized in the sermon of Gregory the Great in 591 CE (*Homilia* 33). In modern scholarship, this "composite Mary" is frequently now rejected. Karen King suggests that Mary Magdalene was deliberately conflated with the sinner of Luke 7 and then Mary of Bethany as part of a strategy to discredit her.⁵⁶ This theory, however, does not match the time line of evidence: Mary Magdalene was first identified as the sister of Lazarus from Bethany and only later conflated with the sinner. Either with or without the addition, the common "composite Mary" character would associate Mary with Bethany. This means that our ancient authors regularly sought an explanation for "Magdalene" that accommodated

associated the Mary at the cross with the Mary earlier associated with his death (12:7)" ("Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," 287).

⁵²See more below. For more on the so-called composite Mary, see Deirdre Good, "Pistis Sophia," in *A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2 of *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 678–707, here 696, 703–4; Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 80, 90, 93, 98; and Mark Goodacre, "The Magdalene Effect: Reading and Misreading the Composite Mary in Early Christian Works," in Beavis and Kateusz, *Rediscovering the Marys*, 7–24.

⁵³See Yancy Smith, *The Mystery of Anointing: Hippolytus' Commentary on the Song of Songs in Social and Critical Contexts: Texts, Translations, and Comprehensive Study* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2015) 527–32; Jack R. Lundbom, "Between Text and Sermon: Mary Magdalene and Song of Songs 3:1–4," *Int* 49 (1995): 172–75.

⁵⁴C. R. C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 187, 192.

⁵⁵Ambrose, *Sermon (On Solomon)* 46.14, discussing John 11; and see Ambrose, *Or.* 5.42–43. See n. 30 above. Ambrose in fact defines two Mary Magdalenes, so in his view only one of these was the sister of Martha.

⁵⁶King, *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 151.

Bethany (not Magdala) as her provenance. As we will see, however, Mary’s provenance would become a complicated matter.

Christian “Magdala”

It is important to note that there is no such place as “Magdala” in any of the earliest Greek gospel manuscripts: Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (fourth century) both read *μαγαδαν* in Matt 15:39, as does Codex Bezae (copied ca. 400 CE).⁵⁷ The oldest Latin copy of the gospels (Codex Vercellensis, fourth century) reads *magedam*, and the fourth-century Syriac Sinaitic palimpsest reads *magdan*. However, starting with Codex Schøyen 2650 (Middle Egyptian Coptic, fourth–fifth century)⁵⁸ and Codex Ephraimi Rescriptus (Greek, fifth century), the name of the town in Matt 15:39 begins to be copied as *μαγδαλαν* instead of *μαγαδαν*. The word *magdala* does not appear in Jerome’s Vulgate, although it appears in one sixth- or seventh-century Old Latin manuscript of Matt 15:39, Codex Monacensis (q).⁵⁹

The reason for these editorial changes needs to be understood holistically. As Christian pilgrimage developed from the fourth to sixth centuries, it went hand in hand with developments of hagiography; and the eventual dominance of “Magdala” in Byzantine manuscripts of Matt 15:39 corresponds with a growing Eastern understanding that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene were *not* the same woman.⁶⁰ John Chrysostom’s *Homily 53 on Matthew*, written in the late fourth or early fifth century, refers to “the borders of Magdala” (τὰ ὅρια Μαγδαλά), not to Magedan.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century) is lacunose here; Codex Sinaiticus has been corrected to *μαγεδαν* by a later hand.

⁵⁸ James M. Leonard, *Codex Schøyen 2650: A Middle Egyptian Coptic Witness to the Early Greek Text of Matthew’s Gospel; A Study in Translation Theory, Indigenous Coptic, and New Testament Textual Criticism*, NTTSD 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 3 n. 12.

⁵⁹ See Adolf Jülicher, Walter Matzkow, and Kurt Aland, eds., *Itala: Das Neue Testament in altlateinische Überlieferung*, 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970–1972), 1:111. The readings *μαγεδα* or *μαγδαλα* would also occasionally supplant *δαλμανουθα* in Greek manuscripts of Mark 8:10, showing a Matthean influence in the transmission of the Markan text. Codex Bezae (D) reads *μελεγαδα* in Mark 8:10 (corrected to *μαγαδα*); the ninth-century Codex Koridethi (Θ) is the earliest extant Greek manuscript to read *μαγδαλα* in this verse. The Old Latin manuscripts of Mark 8:10 read *magedam*, *magedan*, *mageda*, or *magidan*, but never *magdala*. See Jülicher, Matzkow, and Aland, *Itala*, 2:67. The Syriac Sinaitic palimpsest also reads *magdan* in Mark 8:10.

⁶⁰ This Eastern interpretation may have followed the understanding of Origen. Notably also, both in his *Homilies on Matthew* (Sermon 80, on Matt 26:6–7) and *Homilies on John* (Sermon 62, on John 11:1–2), John Chrysostom emphasized that the anointing “prostitute” in Matthew, Mark, and Luke was not the same woman as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus in John. For the shifting of Mary’s identity in East and West, see Joan E. Taylor, “What Did Mary Magdalene Look Like? Images from the West, the East, Dura and Judaea,” in *Dress in Mediterranean Antiquity: Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians*, ed. Alicia Batten, Sarah Bloesch, and Meredith Minister (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021), 257–78.

⁶¹ Although the manuscript transmission of Chrysostom’s homilies is notoriously fraught,

Perhaps the notion that Mary's epithet derived from a place, as found in Origen and Eusebius, inspired some to read similar-sounding Magedan as this place, and the reading in the biblical text was eventually altered accordingly.

In the East eventually three women were distinguished, with three different remembrance days.⁶² This allowed further developments of Mary's story, and further fusions. In a work titled *On Mary Magdalene*,⁶³ attributed to Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem in the fourth century (but actually dated to the fifth–sixth century), Mary is named from a place called “Magdala.” Mary is called the “sister” (relative) of the Virgin Mary; she is actually her aunt, and she is herself a lifelong virgin. She is also a noblewoman (2.11). Her mother Syncletica is herself a daughter of a “wealthy man of the palace, who was from [Ma]gdala” (3.4), and therefore her “mother gave the name of the city to her, Magdalene” (3.6). Thus, Mary is named “the Magdalene” on the basis of the provenance of her grandfather, rather than her own. She is clearly here not Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha since, after Jesus's death, “Saint Magdalene poured upon his body the oil that remained from Lazarus's sister, which Christ had commanded him (to keep) until the day he was buried” (10.10).⁶⁴ Therefore, this work separates the two women at the same time as linking Mary Magdalene with a “city” called Magdala. In another Coptic text attributed to Cyril, also from the sixth century, Mary Magdalene is the mother of Jesus, and also Mary of Cleopas (= Joakim), and is called Magdalene because “the village wherein I was born was called Magdala.”⁶⁵

This Byzantine evidence coincides with contemporaneous pilgrim reports of a place called Magdala and a developing belief that Mary's name could be explained by provenance alone. A sixth-century work by a German archdeacon Theodosius gives distances showing that “Magdala” had become a stopping place: “De Tyberiada usque Magdale, ubi domna Maria nata est, milia II. De Magdale usque ad septem fontes, ubi Christus baptizavit apostolos, milia II ...” (*De situ terrae sanctae*

Frederick Field's critical edition lists every surveyed manuscript of *Homily 53* as reading Μαγδαλά. See Frederick Field, ed., *Homiliae in Matthaevm*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Deighton, 1839), 2:97.

⁶²See Victor Saxer, “Les Saintes Marie Madeleine et Marie de Béthanie dans la tradition liturgique et homilétique orientale,” *RSR* 32 (1958): 1–37.

⁶³See Christine Luckritz Marquis, “Encomium on Mary Magdalene,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, ed. Tony Burke and Brent Landau (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 1:196–216.

⁶⁴Translation from *ibid.*, 208.

⁶⁵Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 30; see also M. R. James, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 87–88, which, under the heading “Coptic Lives, etc., of the Virgin” (with the subheading “The Twentieth Discourse of Cyril of Jerusalem”) offers two excerpts from E. A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: Longmans, 1915), 626, 631.

2)⁶⁶ (“From Tiberias to Magdale, where lady Mary⁶⁷ was born, two miles[tones]. From Magdale to the Seven Springs, where Christ baptised the apostles, two miles[tones] ...”⁶⁸). Here, in the sixth century, we finally find the earliest surviving attestation that Mary Magdalene was actually *born* in a location called Magdala located by the Sea of Galilee, over two miles from Tiberias, just beyond the spur of Mount Arbel.

In the eighth-century version of the itinerary of Epiphanius the Monk (*Itin.* 32 [V]) there is a “house of the Magdalene” by the Sea of Galilee.⁶⁹ In 784 CE, a village “Magdalene” is mentioned in the writings of a nun named Hugeburc (*Hodoeporicon* 14). She recorded the memories of Willibald, the aged bishop of Eichstatt, who had visited Palestine in his youth. Hugeburc gives this statement from Willibald and his companions: “Et inde ibant circa mare & pergebant fecus vicum Magdalene”⁷⁰ (“And from there they went around the sea and came near to the village Magdalene”). Notably, another version of Willibald’s memories mentions “Magdala,” but here it is the village of Lazarus and his sisters (John 11): “Venerunt Magdala, vicum Lazari et sororum eius”⁷¹ (“They came to Magdala, village of Lazarus and his sisters”). There is also mention of Magdala in the writings of Eutychius of Alexandria (*Dem.* 317), from the tenth century.⁷² Likewise, the anonymous eleventh-century Life of Constantine (8) mentions a church here.

Once established as a site for Christian pilgrimage, the attestations continue thick and fast: most mentions of this Magdala come from the time of the Crusaders. Saewulf (1102), Daniel the Abbot (1106), *De situ urbis Jerusalem* (composed 1130, edited by Fetellus in 1200), Belard of Ascoli (1155), Neophytos (1158), John of Würzburg (1165), Theodoric (1172), Ps.-Bede (twelfth century), Benedict of Alignano (1260), Burchard of Mount Sion (1283), and Odoricus de Foro Iulii

⁶⁶Paul Geyer, *Itinera Hierosolymitana saeculi IIII–VIII*, CSEL 39 (Vienna: Tempsky, 1898; repr., CCSL 175 [1965], 138).

⁶⁷The reference to *domna Maria* (“lady Mary”) could indicate that it was Jesus’s mother who was envisaged. See Murcia, *Marie appelée la Magdaléenne*, 290.

⁶⁸The distances cannot be right, because it is more than four miles from Tiberias to Heptapegon, the “Seven Springs,” but this shows that Magdale/a was an identified place.

⁶⁹John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (1977; repr., Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 2002), 214. The *Jerusalem Pilgrims* version of this itinerary has Heptapegon about a mile farther on from Capernaum, and about two miles from Heptapegon “a church containing the house of the Magdalene at the place called Magdala. There the Lord healed her” (trans. Wilkinson).

⁷⁰Titus Tobler and Augustus Molinier, eds., *Itinera Hierosolymitana et descriptiones Terrae Sanctae: Bellis sacris anteriora [et] latina lingua exarata sumptibus Societatis Illustrandis Orientis Latini Monumentis*, 2 vols., Publications de la Société de l’Orient latin: Série géographique 1–2 (Geneva: Fick, 1877), 1:261.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 289.

⁷²Eutychius of Alexandria, *The Book of the Demonstration (Kitab al-Burhan)*, 2 vols. in 4, CSCO: Scriptores Arabici 20–23 (Amsterdam: Peeters, 1961), 2 [23]:136, map. 8. For discussion of the archaeology corresponding with these attestations, see Taylor, “Missing Magdala,” 216.

(1320) all mention a place called Magdala or Magdalum,⁷³ sometimes noting a “house” or “church” of Mary Magdalene. Ricoldus of Montecroce (1293) states it was a bit over halfway between et-Tabgha and Tiberias. This is clearly the site presently called Migdal in Israel today, established where once the Palestinian fishing village of el-Mejdal preserved the name of the Byzantine-Crusader pilgrim site.

Meanwhile, in the Western tradition, it was frequently stated that Magdalum meant “tower.”⁷⁴ In the highly influential *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (thirteenth century), Mary’s Magdalum is situated in Galilee. She is a wealthy woman and inherited, with her brother Lazarus and sister Martha, an ancestral property so named, “two miles from Genezareth,” along with Bethany and a large part of Jerusalem; they divided the property and her part was Magdalum, “whence the name Magdalene.”⁷⁵ This correlates with the literary attestations of a pilgrim site in Galilee, which continued to be visited. Given the importance of this “Magdala,” at least through to the fourteenth century, it is no wonder that the name was preserved in el-Mejdal.

IV. THE MYSTERY OF “MAGDALENE”

Interestingly, the appearance of “Magdala” in Byzantine Gospel manuscripts and the literary records of a pilgrim site called “Magdala” did not solve speculation about Mary’s name. In his Syriac *Commentary on Matthew*, Ishōdad of Merv (ca. 850 CE), the Eastern Syriac bishop of Hadatha, adopts the position that Mary Magdalene (Syriac *Magdelaitha/Magdeletha*) was Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha (see *Comm. Matt.* 20)⁷⁶ and suggests different options about how her name should be interpreted.

Mary Magdeletha was the daughter of Simon the Leper and the sister of Lazarus; but she was called Magdeletha, according to some, because she had lived in Turris Stratonis;⁷⁷ according as others say, from the tower of Siloah; others, that Mary the sister of Lazarus was a harlot, who was called Magdaletha from the tower which she built for herself with the wages of harlotry, according to this shameful deed; but they called her seven devils the consummation of vile

⁷³See the summary in Denys Pringle, *Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2:28.

⁷⁴Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 334. This continues through to the nineteenth-century visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, who understood “Magdalum” to be the Bethany family’s second home. See Anne Catherine Emmerich, *Mary Magdalen in the Visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich* (Charlotte, NC: TAN, 2009), 1.

⁷⁵Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 375.

⁷⁶See Murcia, *Marie appelée la Magdaléenne*, 296.

⁷⁷Straton’s Tower.

passions.... Others say, that the “woman who was a sinner” in the Gospel is another [woman], and it does not reveal her name; but Mary the sister of Lazarus was not a harlot, but chaste and holy, and a keeper of the commandments of God; ... and when our Lord cured her, thus she was increased in virtuous works, until she was called Mary Magdaletha, from the tower of righteousness which she had built for herself, which raised her up to Heaven, that is, made her ascend.⁷⁸

This shows that in a Syriac milieu, even though there was a suggestion that Mary came from a place called *Magdal* (“tower,” i.e., Straton’s Tower or Siloam Tower), it was not accepted as being on the Sea of Galilee and could be a tower elsewhere, even one Mary herself had constructed. This warns us strongly against an assumption that mention of a place named *Magdal*, *Magdalene*, or *Magdalum* in our early texts must refer invariably to the *Magdala* (el-Mejdal) of Byzantine-Crusader Christian pilgrimage. Isho’dad himself appears to agree with Jerome, favoring the idea that *Magdeletha* was a nickname, given to Mary because of the “tower of righteousness” she had built up by her faith and deeds.

Elsewhere in Eastern tradition, we do find other occasional references to Mary hailing from *Magdala*: the Greek historian John Kinnamos said so in the twelfth century, as did the Greek monk Damaskinos Stouditis in the sixteenth century.⁷⁹ Yet we cannot be sure where they thought this place was, or even whether this should be the only way of understanding her name.

In view of the Vulgate evidence, the Bethany-as-*Magdala* link also continued to be considered and was summarized in a work from the early sixteenth century. Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples wrote two treatises valiantly trying to distinguish three different women from the composite Mary of Western tradition.⁸⁰ Even with distinctions made, he suggested that both Marys were still called Mary “*Magdalene*.”

But that this Mary was the sister of Martha, John reveals a little earlier in the raising of Lazarus, saying, “Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town [*castello*] of Mary and her sister Martha.” ... And he indicates plainly enough that this same woman is correctly called *Magdalen*, when he says “of the town of Mary and her sister Martha [*de castello Mariae, et Marthae sororis eius*].” For *Magdalon* means fort, citadel and tower [*castellum, arcem*,

⁷⁸ Translation from Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed. and trans., *The Commentaries of Isho’dad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha* (c. 850 A.D.), in *Syriac and English*, 5 vols., HSem 5–7, 10–11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911–1916), 1:116–17. See also the Syriac-Arabic dictionary entry of Ḥasan bar Bahlul cited in Robert Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), 1:656.

⁷⁹ John Kinnamos, *Epitome rerum ab Joanne et Manuele Comnenis gestarum* 7.8; see A. Meineke, *Ioannis Cinnami epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum*, CSHB 25 (Bonn: Weber, 1836). Damaskinos Stouditis, *Orations* 8 and 29; see E. Deledemou, *Θησαυρός Δαμασκηνοῦ τοῦ ὑποδιακόνου καὶ Στουδίτου* (New York: Atlantis Greek, 1943).

⁸⁰ Sheila M. Porrer, *Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples and the Three Maries Debates: On Mary Magdalen, on Christ’s Three Days in the Tomb, on the One Mary in Place of Three, a Discussion; On the Threefold and Single Magdalen, a Second Discussion*, THR 451 (Geneva: Droz, 2009).

turrimque], and saying “Mary Magdalen” is the same as saying “Mary of the fort or of the tower [*Maria a castello siue a turre*].”⁸¹

V. MARY THE MOTHER AS “MAGDALENE”

Meanwhile, in Eastern contexts, where Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were often separated, Mary Magdalene could also be identified with Mary the mother of Jesus, as we have seen.⁸² This conflation is suggested in Ephrem’s reading of Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (2.17, 5.5, 21.27).⁸³ The conflation has been well documented in the work of Thierry Murcia, though one may question his radical conclusion that this actually means that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother are to be equated historically.⁸⁴ Most interestingly, Murcia examines rabbinic sources that define “Magdalene” as a title for Mary the mother (b. Šabb. 104b; b. Hag. 4b–5a). A passage about Jesus attributed to Rav Hisda (d. 309 CE) states that the word “Megaddela” (מגדלא שער נשיא, lit., “augmentor/plaiter of the hair of women”) was given to Mary due to her being a hairdresser.⁸⁵ Here again we see an ancient understanding of Mary’s name as a nickname, unrelated to provenance. Bauckham thinks that the passage is “undoubtedly a pun on the name of Mary Magdalene’s home town”;⁸⁶ however, while the rabbis are likely making a pun on Mary’s name, there is nothing referencing the mother’s place of origin (whether as Magdala or Nazareth). The root here for Mary’s name is גדל (“to be great/large”) as also emphasized by Origen. Aramaic *paēl* גדל means “to make bigger,” with a sense of “build/heap up,” “increase,” or “augment”; hence it could apply to a hairdresser weaving, twisting, and building up a hairstyle.⁸⁷ This also lies behind the meaning of מגדל as “tower” (a tower being a structure “made large/great”). The rabbis then point us in an intriguing direction. While they took a route down one verbal form, the Aramaic word מגדלתא (*Magdalaetha*), may well be read as an *aphel* passive participle, literally meaning “she who was caused to be made great,” or rather “the magnified one.”⁸⁸

⁸¹ Ibid., 190–91.

⁸² Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 30–31.

⁸³ See also Ephrem, *Paschal Hymns* 4.13, 17.

⁸⁴ Murcia, *Marie appelée la Magdaléenne*. See the review by Joan Taylor in *JTS* 71 (April 2020): 336–39.

⁸⁵ B. Šabb. 104b (see also b. Šabb. 67a). See Sefaria.org, “Shabbat 104b,” <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.104b.5?lang=bi>.

⁸⁶ Bauckham, *Magdala of Galilee*, 349.

⁸⁷ In Hebrew מגדלת (*megaddelet*, the *piel* feminine active participle) could also mean a nurse or teacher of infants. See further Murcia, *Marie appelée la Magdaléenne*, 291. See Jastrow, s.v. “גדל”; Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, rev. ed. (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2017), 108–9, s.v. גדל.

⁸⁸ This is suggested by Murcia, but in relation to the mother of Jesus (*Marie appelée la Magdaléenne*, 287–92).

If we are to look for clues in our gospel material, we can observe that, in two cases where Mary’s epithet is mentioned, it is followed by reference to her having seven demons go out of her (Luke 8:2, Mark 16:9). Luke has, “Mary called the ‘Magdalene’ from whom seven demons had gone out”; this reads as if being “called” such had something to do with the illness-causing demons. Given that this number of demons was very great, was she “magnified” by the miracle of their expulsion? If so, this would have been a possible allusion only in Aramaic, and hence lost on Greek speakers.

It may be that there are multiple puns at work. The epithet could also have been attached to Mary because of her witnessing the crucifixion and her witness and testimony to Christ’s resurrection, or because of her anointing Jesus ahead of his death, if she is understood as Mary of Bethany. After all, in the Gospel of Mark, when the unnamed anointing woman in Bethany completes her action, Jesus says, “wherever in all the world the good news is proclaimed, what she has done also will be told in memory of her” (Mark 14:9). That certainly indicates greatness.

VI. CONCLUSION

The position that “the Magdalene” simply references a city by the Sea of Galilee is not supported by ancient authors. From the pervasive usage of participles of *καλέω*, we can infer that the author of Luke-Acts understood *ἡ Μαγδαληνή* to be a special nickname, not likely indicating provenance. In the third century, Origen thought that Mary’s name indicated an unidentified place named “magnification,” indicating something special about Mary herself (Origen; cf. Magdolos of Num 33:7; Magdol of Ezek 29:10 and 30:6) and pointing to her significance. Eusebius thought that there were two women who came from a village named “Magdalene” (which was not the “Magdala” Eusebius knew, the Judean town from Josh 15:37). Wherever this place was imagined, it was not a city named Tarichaea, and there is no association with Galilee. Macarius Magnes testifies to a widespread belief that Mary came from some obscure, poor village. Jerome believed her name had nothing to do with provenance; Mary was the one “of the tower” (*turritae*), because of her diligence and faith.

With developments in hagiography in the fourth and fifth centuries, some Christians seem to have begun to look for a place called “Magdala” from which Mary Magdalene hailed. “Magedan” was switched out for “Magdala” in manuscripts, and, in the sixth century, a place by the Sea of Galilee appeared as a pilgrim stop. A church understood to be the House of Mary Magdalene became an important destination for pilgrims through to the Crusader period, and its name was preserved in the village of el-Mejdal.

Origen’s identification that the key underlying Hebrew/Aramaic indicated “magnification” may well be a clue to Mary’s name. Indeed, *ἡ Μαγδαληνή* could

well be understood as “the magnified one,” on the basis of Aramaic. Both in a Syriac milieu and in rabbinic discussions there was an attempt to understand Mary’s moniker in line with meaning rather than provenance. Given such understandings among later speakers of the language of Jesus and his disciples, it would be hard to insist that ἡ Μαγδαληνή must indicate only provenance.

So why has “Mary of Magdala” become so popular? The answer may lie in the underlying motivations of some feminist and evangelical scholarship (two camps who are rarely such friendly bedfellows).⁸⁹ Scholars like King, Schaberg, and others support the explanation of Mary’s epithet as Mary “of Magdala” along with a move to dissociate her from any anointing scene (including the one at Bethany). This clears the way for Mary Magdalene to be portrayed independent of any association with sin or sexuality, as if she is besmirched by this.⁹⁰

The move to rehabilitate Mary’s image by situating her in “Magdala” has made its way into the most recent portrayals of Mary in the mainstream media.⁹¹ Yet the central exegetical mistake of Western Christendom that needs correcting is not the idea that Mary Magdalene might be from Bethany; rather, it is the notion, following Gregory the Great, that all the gospels’ anointing women can be elided into one. As an alternative, we suggest that biblical scholars can celebrate the liberation of Mary Magdalene from inaccurate portrayals while simultaneously acknowledging that Mary’s provenance need not be “Magdala” to maintain this hard-won position.

Meanwhile Bauckham’s argument seems to be in line with the modern evangelical Christian desire to attach firm archaeological data to biblical events and characters as a means of affirming their historical authenticity. Jennifer Wright Knust notes that “throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historical research, archaeology, and textual criticism worked in tandem to establish

⁸⁹ Here we explicate current ideological motivations behind the modern popularity of “Mary of Magdala”; however, some feminist and evangelical scholars are continuing a historical-critical approach that began in the eighteenth century. At this time the Textus Receptus read *μαγδαλα* in Matt 15:39. See, e.g., the comment in James Macknight’s 1756 *Harmony of the Four Gospels*: “It is generally supposed, that the woman who anointed our Lord in the house of Simon, was she who in the gospel is called Mary Magdalene. But I know of no reason for the opinion . . . she was called ἡ Μαγδαληνή, the Magdalene or Magdalite, probably from Magdala, the place of her nativity, a town situated somewhere beside the lake, and mentioned, Matt. xv. 39” (*A Harmony of the Four Gospels, in Which the Natural Order of Each Is Preserved, with a Paraphrase and Notes*, 2 vols. in 1 [London, 1756], 1:133n–134n).

⁹⁰ See, e.g., the summary from the back cover of de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*: “The picture of Mary Magdalene cherished by the ages, which emphasized her sexuality and suppressed her weakness, lies in shreds.”

⁹¹ See, e.g., the 2018 film *Mary Magdalene* (dir. Garth Davis; co-production of Universal Pictures, Film4 Productions, and See-Saw Films; starring Rooney Mara), and the History Channel’s “Jesus: His Life,” Season 1, Episode 7 (15 April 2019), “Mary Magdalene: The Crucifixion” (starring Cassie Bradley), both of which portray Mary as an independent woman hailing from Magdala.

the accuracy of the Bible, reinforcing one another in a harmonic loop.”⁹² The desire to pinpoint Mary Magdalene’s hometown as a specific, historical location that can be archaeologically excavated indeed serves the purpose of certain scholars who seek “a way in which theology and history may meet in the historical Jesus instead of parting company there.”⁹³ While there is nothing wrong with correlating archaeology and biblical material, correlating archaeology definitively with *interpretations* of biblical material requires firmer evidence.

The traditions about Mary Magdalene are many and various, West and East, but the assumption that *Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή* should be exclusively translated as “Mary of Magdala” is questionable. The word *Μαγδαληνή* has always been read in various ways, and, though Mary’s provenance is one possible interpretation, an interpretation focused on meaning is more aligned with the overall presentation of Luke-Acts. She may have been considered a “tower” of faith or “magnified” for her actions, and multiple meanings may have been overlaid. Whatever the case, it seems likely that Mary Magdalene’s nickname indicates her position as one of Jesus’s closest disciples (Mary “the Tower-ess” or “the Magnified,” similar to Peter “the Rock” or James and John “Sons of Thunder”).⁹⁴ Moreover, the ancient position that Mary Magdalene hailed from Bethany remains within the realm of sensible exegetical possibility. Thus, future scholars and translators should most accurately reflect the biblical text in choosing to reference this character as “Mary (called) the Magdalene.”

⁹²Jennifer Wright Knust, “Editing without Interpreting: The Museum of the Bible and New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2019), 145–70, here 154.

⁹³Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 5.

⁹⁴See Taylor, “Missing Magdala,” 222.